KANT'S *IMITATIO CHRISTI*

Daniel Whistler

ABSTRACT

This article retrieves Kant's *imitatio Christi* as a viable alternative to the recent construal of mimesis as a universal human desire, in particular Ward's reformulation of the *imitatio Christi* in such terms (in which the human condition is defined by an intrinsic desire for God as other). Kant's writings participate in a very different debate on imitation – one sceptical of its ethical value, and this plays out as a continual ambivalence towards the concept in his work. Kant's *imitatio Christi*, however, does, I contend, make possible a moral form of imitation by characterising it as a rational and intersubjective debate upon the good. Imitating Christ becomes part of human ethical living in the world.

Mimesis has been a live issue in contemporary theory since René Girard reinvigorated the debate in the early 60s, and in Graham Ward's recent work, the Girardian renaissance of mimesis has even informed an articulation of the *imitatio Christi*, in which human life is intrinsically bound up with a desire to imitate Christ's life and subsequent fate. In this paper, however, I wish to provide an alternative to Ward's *imitatio Christi* by instead considering it in terms of a discussion of imitation dominant *in the eighteenth-century*. In Immanuel's Kant's *Religion within the Boundaries of Mere Reason*[1], I contend, this discussion led to an idea of the *imitatio Christi* very different to Ward's.

I will, therefore, begin by very broadly sketching the terms of the contemporary debate on mimesis in which Graham Ward's account of the *imitatio Christi* is framed, before turning to the controversy that surrounded the concept in the eighteenth-century. This, I hope, will make possible an appreciation of the advantages and disadvantages of each of the concepts. It is to Kant I will devote much of the discussion, because – as well as developing in his ethical writings a very distinct and complex response to the problem of imitation – through it he also generates a view of the *imitatio Christi* that is, in my view, significant.

CONTEMPORARY ACCOUNTS OF MIMESIS

The foundations of the contemporary concern with mimesis can be traced to 1961 and René Girard's first work, *Deceit, Desire and the Novel*; it was he who was the first to claim that "mimetic desire is a universal reality" (Girard 1978a 105). With such a statement, Girard established a new way of conceiving the issue of imitation[2] both in terms of desire, and as universal, and so ineluctable. There is no such thing as

[1] I will henceforth refer to this work as the *Religion*.
[2] I do not attempt to formalise the relation between imitation and mimesis in this article for this is one of the issues at stake. Indeed, while on the one hand it would be quite natural to identify the two terms, mimesis' indissoluble link to desire in contemporary critical discourse may instead lead one to speak of Kantian imitation as non-mimetic.

'spontaneous' desire, all desire is mediated through others; it is always relational: "We always desire what others desire, in imitation of them, and not on our own impetus. Our desires are second hand, never properly ours from the start" (Potolsky 146). There is, therefore, a constant triangular structure to all desire – the object of my desire is such only because it is the object of another's desire; or, to put it another way, desire imitates desire – it is essentially mimetic.

This initial analysis has at least two consequences for Girard: first, violence follows (almost) as a necessity, since rivalries develop over the same object which different people have come to desire through mutual imitation. Girard states, "Mimesis generates violence and violence accelerates mimesis." (Girard 1978a 93) Second, the analysis of such desire as universal has led Girard to espouse a type of biologism. Mimesis is what links us to the animal kingdom: "Mimetic rivalry," he writes, "is not even specifically human… Mimetic phenomena provide the common ground between animal and human society." (1978b 201-4) There is, he claims, an innate "mimetic drive" in the brain (201). Our mimetic 'instinct' is immediate, prior to all social and symbolic constructs: mimesis is "more original than meaning" (1978a 106). Hence, Girard often speaks of mimetic desire in biological metaphors; for example, when he writes, "This mode of imitation operates with a quasiosmotic immediacy necessarily betrayed and lost in all the dualities of the modern problematics of desire" (89). It is such immediacy which has been famously criticised by Philippe Lacoue-Labarthe: mimesis, according to Girard, occurs "at a more primordial level" (1978b 203) to all thought – it exists in an impossible realm on the "hither side of representation" (Lacoue-Labarthe 1998 111).

It is within this debate that Graham Ward states at the beginning of *Christ and Culture*, "At the crux of the Christological reflections offered lies an account of desire and mimesis." (Ward 2005 25) Mimesis takes on this significance for Ward, because it helps him escape – what he sees as – a Barthian fallacy. Karl Barth's dialectical method forces him to maintain that, even when Christ becomes human, he remains wholly other; as Ward puts it, "Barth's Jesus Christ is not a social animal; he is an other, an alien" (12). To recompense this theologically inadequate position, Ward emphasises "the nexus of relations in which the historical, social and cultural engage with the divine" (1). Ward's Jesus Christ is, it is claimed, enmeshed in human relationships, embodied in "the economics of desiring" (25). The statement 'The

believer desires Christ' is, then, the basic axiom of Ward's book; and what is important in his unpacking of this statement is that desire for Christ should not merely identified with a desire for mystic union, but should remain human, political and active: we desire to be like Christ, not just to be unified with him. Ward, thus, resurrects the *imitatio Christi* on the basis of mimetic desire.

This, then, is an *imitatio Christi* inspired by Girard and Lacoue-Labarthe. Thus, while Ward accepts Lacoue-Labarthe's criticisms of Girardian mimesis, he still maintains that it has its basis in *desire*, that this desire is *universal*, and that such desire gives birth to almost necessary *violence*. Hence, Ward speaks of "a madness born of *imitation*", and he identifies such madness with "a divine logic radically at odds with our own and our representation's [logic]" (58). Yet, despite Ward's claim to be hereby demonstrating the social nature of Christ, we can immediately see that the *imitatio Christi* is, for him, *super-rational*, that it takes humanity out of itself to conform to patterns of acting completely alien to its being-in-the-world. To be human is to be universally beset by a desire to no longer be human, and instead to follow Christ to divinity. The *imitatio Christi* is conceived as an innate instinct for what is utterly other to human living; Ward fails to live up to his project of a social, human *imitatio Christi*.[3]

It is in direct opposition to Ward's actual *imitatio Christi* (and so compatible with his initial project) that we can read Kant's own attempts at formulating the doctrine. He is intent on demonstrating the *moral* significance of such mimesis; that is, the manner in which it is *productive* for *human* reason, and the way it aids ethical living *in the world*. Kant discovers an *imitatio Christi* that is not violent and destructive of what is human, but rather – while acknowledging theological orthodoxies concerning Christ – celebrates human living within the world. Thus, I propose to read Kant's *imitatio Christi* against Kantianism as well as Barthianism: what is at stake in his *imitatio Christi* is not – as critical orthodoxy maintains – a denial of the possibility of incarnation and thus of embodied moral action, but rather an ambivalent and tentative attempt at valorising such concepts.

[3] For a more detailed account of this incongruence, see Whistler 2008.

THE PROBLEM OF IMITATION IN THE EIGHTEENTH-CENTURY

Before I turn to look at Kant's own struggle with imitation, however, I want to first sketch the background to the debate in which Kant's own contribution must be situated. There is, I contend, a discourse in the eighteenth-century that has been neglected despite its pertinence to Kantian ethical theory. This neglected discourse supplements and complicates our view of Enlightenment ethics and, in so doing, provides a very different context for discussions of imitation. Three figures from the eighteenth-century are pertinent here: Jean-Jacques Rousseau, Karl-Philip Moritz and J.G. Herder. Kant maintained close (if volatile) relations with all three of them: one as mentor, the second as contemporary and the third as student then rival. Their use of imitation will thus be useful for grasping Kant's own.

The problems surrounding the concept of imitation receive their classic formulation in the second book of Rousseau's *Emile*. It is important to note straight-off the appearance imitation makes here in an *educational* treatise: while classically mimesis has been seen as a concept of aesthetics, through Rousseau discussion of it in *Emile* it becomes embroiled in pedagogics. Moreover, what is just as significant is how Rousseau considered *Emile* a piece of *moral* philosophy.[4] It was ethics and educational reform which produced the context for imitation at the end of the eighteenth-century.

On the one hand, Rousseau is adamant that imitation is often to be considered an evil, a corruption of natural simplicity, since it is based on relations to others. One's own action is mediated through the example of another's action; thus, imitation is a form of *amour propre*: it attends to the value of others rather than oneself. In society, one rather imitates to "deceive others or win applause for [one's] own talents than [to] become wiser or better." (Rousseau 1974 68) Imitation breeds "dependence on men", which as "the work of society… gives rise to every kind of vice" (49). Hence, Rousseau advises, "The main thing is that the child shall do… nothing because of other people" (56-7).

What is more, imitation is often abused as an easy short cut to what appears good and, as such, is concomitant with a lack of self-reflection on what that good in

[4] See Jimack 1974 ix.

fact is. Imitation prevents the external spectator from discerning whether someone is in fact good or bad, since "harlequins… knowing their own baseness… try to equal what is better than they are" (68). In such cases of deception, it becomes impossible to distinguish the morally good person from someone who is reprehensible: public morality disintegrates. Imitation is thus bound up with an externality which masks what is true about a person's character; it is a form of deception.

Despite all of this, Rousseau also wants to *defend* a conception of imitation. There are two reasons for this. First, to imitate something is a natural expression of admiration for it. All of nature is permeated by such mimetic attraction. Thus, "The love of imitating comes from well-regulated nature... The monkey imitates man, whom he fears, and not the other beasts, which he scorns; he thinks what is done by his betters must be good." *Only* in society does imitation "become a vice". (68)

Second, and more importantly for our purposes, Rousseau finds in imitation a useful device for teaching. Yet, even here, Rousseau's valorisation is at best ambivalent. There are two types of teaching: teaching by reasoning and teaching by example. Rousseau attacks the first as not suitable for matters of morality and good living in general, since it does not alter the whole of the pupil's being (including his[5] heart), but instead appeals merely to his mind.[6] Rousseau's example is the teaching of generosity: to give a child reasons for generosity will never, he contends, make them *truly* generous, for such reasons can never truly *move* the child; they will make the pupil clever enough to know why one should be generous, but never good enough to actually *be* generous. For this, only teaching by example is suitable: "Remember that your lessons should always be in deeds rather than words" (64). It is only by imitating the good example of the teacher that the pupil will truly discover the value of generosity in his heart and encounter it as a virtue. "Teachers," Rousseau exclaims, "Be good and kind; let your example sink into your scholars' memories until they can enter their hearts." (68)

Yet, Rousseau is insistent that imitating good examples is not *in itself* virtuous. Only once the value of virtue has been realised by the child *for himself* can he truly act in a virtuous manner, but such autonomy is unteachable: the child will

[5] Rousseau notoriously limits these observations to male pupils.

[6] Examples of Rousseau's views on this matter are too numerous to cite. His main opponent in this matter was John Locke who had advocated reasoning with children; Rousseau opposes himself to this vogue adamantly: all such education does is train children to be argumentative and talk well, the tutor barrages them with words which they do not understand and so they never get to the truth of things. To educate by reasoning is to concentrate on the sign rather than the truth it signifies.

always remain passive whilst the teacher is teaching him. Imitation, while relatively a good method (that is, better than merely discursive pedagogy), is still only a preliminary to the child's actual becoming-moral which can only occur independently of any teaching. Rousseau writes,

> I know that all these imitative virtues are only the virtues of a monkey, and that a good action is only morally good when it is done as such and not because others do it. But at an age when the heart does not yet feel anything, you must make children copy the deeds you wish to grow into habits, until they can do them with understanding and for the love of what is good. (ibid)

Despite all the problems that imitation possesses, despite the fact that it is bound up in *amour propre*, that it – like all other teaching methods – is unable to teach morality as such, Rousseau still affirms imitation, and he does so because it alone is able to display moral actions – rather than merely talking about them. Imitation is desirable in spite of its dangers because it maintains a connection – even though a slight one – with the good.

The opening to Karl-Philip Moritz' work of 1788, "On the Artistic Imitation of the Beautiful", provides a significant advance on Rousseau's discussion. Moritz distinguishes between parody, aping and imitating proper (or imitating "in the noble moral sense"). Parody is merely concerned with repeating the unique, external characteristics of another person (in this case, Socrates); aping is a complete imitation of Socrates but not for any other ulterior purpose than to copy him – this is the actor's ultimate purpose. Truly moral imitation is something else entirely; it is *emulation*. Let me quote Moritz at length,

> Imitation is used in the nobler moral sense and is almost synonymous with the concept of striving after and competing; this is the case because the virtue which I imitate, for example, in a particular role model has something universal, something which is above individuality, and which can be achieved by everyone who strives after it… But since I am lesser than this role model, and since a certain degree of noble sentiment and type of action would hardly have been possible without this role model, I call my striving for some communal good, which must, of course, also be achieved by my role model, the imitation of this role model. I imitate my role model, I strive after him; I try to compete with him. – My role model has set my goal higher than if I had set it myself. I must thus strive, according to my powers, and in

> my way, to reach this goal; I may finally forget my role model and try to set my goal yet further, if this is possible. Imitation only gains its true worth through this nobler moral sentiment. (2003 131-2)

The role model is not here the end in itself, but rather a means to access a 'virtue… which is above individuality', a communal good which everyone can achieve by striving after it through others. The role model is not intrinsically important, but can be forgotten at the end of the process; her instrumental importance, rather, lies in forcing the subject to transcend herself to something existing beyond her own subjective horizons. The encounter with the exemplar is productive of a new ideal – one that, in synthesising more than one subjective viewpoint, gestures towards what is more universal, the good as such, rather than merely my personal good.

A very similar distinction between mere aping and true imitation can be found in J.G. Herder's *Essay on the Origin of Language*. In uncovering what it means to use language, Herder resorts to differentiating animal attempts at human language from the human's own use of it. He writes,

> The dog has learned to understand many words and commands, but not as words, only as signs associated with gestures and actions. Were he ever to understand a single word in the human sense, he would no longer serve, he would create for himself his art, his society, and his language. (Herder 1966 126)

There is no command over the language in the case of the animal: they imitate only through an external reflex; they imitate the sign and not the essence of language. There is no internal creative connection to the words; this language is not a principle of their thought, but is only causally evoked by a law of association. Animals *ape* language; it is for them an immediate instinct bypassing all conscious intention, whereas, for a human subject acquiring language, *will* and *reflection* are involved, and mediate between the sound heard and the similar sound produced. To quote Herder again,

> It has been assumed to be a basic principle that man wants to imitate nature and hence also nature's sounds. As though such a blind inclination had any room for thought. And as though the ape with precisely this inclination, or the blackbird which is so well able to mimic sounds, has invented a language. (118)

In opposition to such mimicking which bypasses reason in favour of immediate sensuous reflex, there is, Herder thus suggests, the possibility of *empirically-acquired, but still cognitive action* – a *hermeneutic*, rather than instinctive, form of imitation.

This, then, is the context in which Kant's reflections on imitation must be situated. There was throughout the eighteenth-century a profound unease about this concept. To affirm it was to affirm a kind of deception and so to affirm something seemingly unworthy of moral living; yet, at the same time, imitation was attractive for moral existence because it was not merely intellectual, but provided a means to become virtuous with one's whole being. It is for this reason that while it was accepted, it was often accepted only with distinctions in tow, that is, only if it were made clear that moral imitation had nothing to do with mere external reflexes, but truly partook in reflection. Intellectual imitation was to be salvaged as imitation's moral kernel, while instinctive imitation was to be discarded as its immoral husk.

I will spend the rest of the article considering Kant's attitude towards imitation, and I will find precisely the same ambivalence towards the concept as is present in many of his contemporaries.

IMITATION IN KANT'S ETHICS

THE AMBIVALENCE TOWARDS IMITATION IN THE *GROUNDWORK*

Kant's *Groundwork* celebrates the autonomy of the good act. This early work is dominated by a distinction between autonomy and heteronomy which shapes the rest of his ethical philosophy. He states,

> Autonomy of the will is the property of the will by which it is a law to itself (independently of any property of the objects of volition)… [whereas] if the will seeks the law that is to determine it *anywhere else* than in the fitness of its maxims for its own giving of universal law – consequently, if, in going beyond itself, it seeks this law in a property of any of its objects – *heteronomy* always results. (Kant 1996b 4:440-1)[7]

The good will is the autonomous will; it is the will which is self-contained, free and independent. It is hidden and inscrutable to mere sensuous intuition. It is the will

[7] All page references to Kant's works are to the standard *Akademie* edition.

which is its own 'law-giver': "Lawgiving must be found in every rational being himself and be able to arise from his will" (4:434). Heteronomy, on the other hand, is detrimental to morals; it is the state in which the will is coerced into willing by an external maxim, where it does not give laws but is given them. Kant's moral universe is, to this extent, dual. On the one hand, there are inclinations, sensible and external motives, that press upon the will to be realised; it is the subject's duty to avoid acting on these. On the other hand, there is the purity of the categorical imperative, reason itself, which it is the subject's duty to realise.

It is in the midst of this picture that Kant alludes a number of times in the text to the problem of imitation. His first mention of the problem seems to resolve the issue straight-out: "Imitation has no place at all in matters of morality." (4:409) Kant could hardly have been more emphatic: mimesis cannot be tolerated; it is unethical. This, of course, makes sense on Kant's ethics: emulating another subject (even another autonomous subject) is always heteronomous, because it is always to choose to act on the sensible inclination received from the other, rather than the categorical imperative which is one's own. To imitate is always to obey an external voice instead of the force of one's own reason. Mimesis is bad because it is heteronomous; it involves desire for something outside one's own reason.

However, despite the simplicity of such a statement, things are not this simple. For example, Kant writes in a footnote on "the teachings of virtue":

> If we represent an action of integrity done with steadfast soul, apart from every view to advantage of any kind in this world or another… it elevates the soul and awakens a wish to be able to act in like manner oneself. (4:411)

A sensible representation of an autonomous act *should*, Kant here claims, incite mimesis, a desire "to act in like manner oneself": some form of imitation of the good does here seem proper to moral consciousness. There *is*, therefore, a point to imitation; the question, however, remains whether any notion of imitation can be formulated without succumbing to the pitfall of heteronomy.

There is also a third passage in the *Groundwork*, perhaps the most famous passage in the whole of Kant's philosophy on the subject of imitation. What makes this passage even more significant for us is that the discussion of mimesis here occurs in relation to the *imitatio Christi* itself; what is at stake is the very possibility of

copying Christ's life in a moral manner. Moreover, this passage exemplifies the ambivalence towards imitation found between the previous two passages. Kant writes,

> Nor could one give worse advice to morality than by wanting to derive it from examples. For, every example of it represented to me must itself first be appraised in accordance with principles of morality, as to whether it is also worthy to serve as an original example, that is, as a model; it can by no means authoritatively provide the concept of morality. Even the Holy One of the Gospel must first be compared with our ideal of moral perfection before he is cognised as such. (4:408)

Kant begins the passage by firmly ruling out moral imitation: exemplarity is, indeed, the worst possible path to follow in order to arrive at the good. Yet, in the very explanation of this prohibition, he seems to end up – despite himself – providing a schema for just how such exemplarity could be possible! Thus, Kant does not deny that Christ *can* in fact be an 'ideal of moral perfection'; rather, he just makes clear that, *in order to be so*, his empirical action must be rationally reflected upon by way of our own ideal (the categorical imperative). Hence, an exemplar can 'by no means authoritatively' provide an instance of the good (again this qualification suggests that the possibility is not totally excluded), that is, it cannot do so by heteronomously forcing reason to mimic something external; however, an exemplar *can* still be morally helpful, Kant implies, if it *is* able be an instance of the good after being 'appraised in accordance with principles of morality'. Imitation is possible if the exemplar is made conformable to our own human vocation: *imitating what is other is heteronomous, but imitating what has been appropriated as our own is indeed a possible form of autonomy*.[8] Judgment is prior to imitation, but if what is to be imitated is judged worthy of so being, then imitation – having passed through the hermeneutic of reason – is legitimate. The distinction Kant makes is one that we saw in Moritz and Herder: while an immediate desire to imitate the other is to be rejected, imitation mediated by one's own reason (one's own innate sense of the good) can be embraced.

[8] Notice also Kant's words, "*our* ideal of moral perfection" – the human ideal is intersubjective, thus it requires support from outside to strengthen its universality. Imitation emphasises what is shared and intersubjective; it points to the universality of our ideal properly conceived.

A CONTINUAL AMBIVALENCE

The *Groundwork* is not definitive on the issue of imitation: at one point it point blank denies its moral significance, at another it equally strongly affirms it, and in a third passage Kant more circumspectly suggests the moral usefulness of imitation but only by making the traditional eighteenth-century distinction between moral-rational and instinctive mimesis. The ambivalence found in this early work on ethics remains with Kant until the end. Thus, on the one hand, the *Metaphysics of Morals* draws attention to the degeneracy of "blind imitation"[9], and the *Lectures on Pedagogy*, published in 1803, categorically state, in regard to moral education, that "everything is spoiled if one tries to ground this culture on examples" (Kant 2007 9:475)[10].

However, on the other hand, there is a continuing desire on Kant's part to salvage some form of imitation in ethics. An example from the *Metaphysics of Morals* will be enough to demonstrate this. At the very end of the work, §52, he explicitly discusses the very problem of imitation which had haunted his earlier work. I quote the significant paragraph in full.

> The *experimental* (technical) means for cultivating virtue is *good* example on the part of the teacher (his exemplary conduct) and *cautionary* example in others, since, for a still undeveloped human being, imitation is the first determination of his will to accept maxims that he afterwards makes for himself. – To form a habit is to establish a lasting inclination apart from any maxim, through frequently repeated gratifications of that inclination; it is a mechanism of sense rather than a principle of thought (and one that is easier to *acquire* than to *get rid of* afterwards). – As for the power of examples (good and bad) that can be held up to the propensity for imitation or warning, what others give us can establish no maxim of virtue. For a maxim of virtue consists precisely in the subjective autonomy of each human being's practical reason and so implies that the law itself, not the conduct of other human beings, must serve as our incentive. Accordingly a teacher will not tell his naughty pupil: take an example from that good (orderly, diligent) boy! For this would only cause him to hate that boy, who puts him in an unfavourable

[9] "A human being cannot carry his giving an example of the respect due to others so far as to degenerate into blind imitation (in which custom, *mos*, is raised to the dignity of a law), since such a tyranny of popular mores would be contrary to his duty to himself." (Kant 1996d 6:464)

[10] There is some controversy about exactly when these lecture notes date from, but it seems likely that they were revised after 1801. See the translator's discussion on p462 of the work.

> light. A good example (exemplary conduct) should not serve as a model but only as a proof that it is really possible to act in conformity with duty. So it is not comparison with any other human being whatsoever (as he is), but with the *idea* (of humanity), as he ought to be, and so comparison with the law, that must serve as the constant standard of a teacher's instruction. (6:479-80)

The first words of this paragraph celebrate imitation's relevance to morality more than any others in Kant's oeuvre: exemplary conduct to be imitated by the pupil, Kant states categorically, *the* 'experimental' means for cultivating virtue. However, such commendation is quickly followed by a qualification, which in the end serves to distance imitation from morality proper. Imitation is merely *a habit* of the senses; it does not yet belong to the faculty of thought, which alone is worthy of morality. Imitation is merely a prelude to this, a means to habituate the will towards the good that it must afterwards discover itself. A principle obtained through imitation *is* not *itself* a 'maxim of virtue' even though it is the best, and perhaps only, means of *cultivating* such virtue experimentally.

It is for this reason Kant distinguishes between imitation as a model and imitation as a proof.[11] Imitation cannot be an appropriate model for ethical practice or practical reasoning, since they can*not* have any external reference but must rather be generated by one's own autonomous reason. However, imitation *is* useful for practical reason as a proof that virtue *is possible*: another's conduct should not be conceived as an imperative to follow (as a maxim), but *as a fact* to be experienced, and hence an aid in choosing the good (as it has now been perceived to be possible).[12] Another's conduct supports our own choice of the good, since it is a phenomenal manifestation displaying the worth of so choosing the good.

We see here how Kant's theory of imitation has developed. It retains the basic property implied in the *Groundwork*, that another's example to be morally significant

[11] This distinction (and the consequences that follow from it) must be taken with a pinch of salt, for the very example which Kant uses in the above quotation to adduce it by declaring the teacher's practice of promoting competition illegitimate, is, in contrast, described elsewhere in his work as "the case in which emulation could be of some use" (2007 9:491). This passage from the *Lectures on Pedagogy* also demonstrates Kant's continuing attraction to the dualism we saw in Moritz, in which a 'useful' version of imitation is salvaged from the more general "inappropriate spirit of emulation" which is "a quite ignoble way of thinking" (ibid.).

[12] Indeed, I interpret Kant here as envisaging 'exemplary conduct' as 'a fact of experience' parallel to the 'fact of reason', freedom (and more generally the other postulates). Imitation, like the postulates, makes sense of human ethical action – by exemplifying its possibility.

must be mediated through one's own reason.[13] However, imitation is now given a *determinate* role in this mediation: it is to act as the evidence (as distinct from any form of motivation) which indirectly incites the will to act according to its own sense of duty.

Having now considered the problem of imitation as it runs through Kant's ethical thought, as well as his attempted solution to the problem therein, it is time to turn to the *imitatio Christi* itself as Kant describes it in the *Religion*.

IMITATIO CHRISTI

With the foregoing as prelude – I now want to consider what I contend is Kant's most definitive formulation of the problem of imitation, which he achieves in attempting to formulate the *imitatio Christi*. Kant's actual discussion of the *imitatio Christi* in the *Religion* is exceedingly brief: it occupies three paragraphs, that is, half of sub-section B ("The Objective Reality of this Idea") of Section 1 ("Concerning the Rightful Claim of the Good Principle to Dominion over the Human Being") of the second part of the work. However, these paragraphs are tortuously condensed and complex, and this in itself indicates the continuing ambivalence Kant felt towards imitation. There are, I will show below, three separate attempts made by Kant in these three paragraphs to satisfactorily articulate the traditional Christian doctrine of the *imitatio Christi*.

At this point in his exposition, Kant has reached the stage at which he has demonstrated that "to become a morally good human being it is not enough simply to let the germ of the good which lies in our species develop unhindered; there is in us an active and opposing cause of evil which is also to be combated" (Kant 1998 6:57). Moreover, he has also shown the means by which evil can be successfully combated – by conforming oneself to "*Humanity* (rational being in general as pertaining to the world) *in its full moral perfection*" (6:60), or, more traditionally put, in imitating Christ. Christ is thus for Kant (*at this stage*) the rational idea of the most morally perfect possible human, and from such an ideal there necessarily follows a constraint

[13] Hence, the last sentence of the above passage from the *Metaphysics of Morals* reads very similarly to the last sentence I quoted from the third passage involving imitation in the *Groundwork*.

on our will to become like it: "It is our universal human duty to *elevate* ourselves to this ideal of moral perfection, i.e. to the prototype of moral disposition in its entire purity" (6:61). In obeying the ideal, reason imitates Christ; such imitation is to "steadfastly cling to the prototype of humanity and follow this prototype's example in loyal emulation" (6:62).

However, to make the imitation of Christ equivalent to following the dictates of reason is *not enough* for Kant. In the next section, "The Objective Reality of this Idea", he attempts to go further and show that this prototype of humanity must be assumed to have existed in the world phenomenally and so be more than a mere idea of reason. To imitate Christ is to imitate another being acting in front of one in the world. Kant shows his desire to move closer to a traditional theological worldview than is generally admitted by giving more attention to incarnation than standard accounts of Kantianism permit. Kant contends first, that Jesus of Nazareth lived (or at least there is no reason to assume he did not), and, second, that it is our moral imperative to imitate that *life* – and not merely to imitate an idea of reason.

Such an interpretation is not inferable from the first paragraph of the section, however. Kant is here intent on showing how unnecessary such an objective existence of the idea would be. In so doing, he tackles head-on the theory of imitation he will later develop in the *Metaphysics of Morals*: that imitation is needed as a proof of the possibility of acting morally. In *Religion*, Kant *rejects* this theory – no proof of the categorical imperative should impinge on moral action in any way. He writes, "From the practical point of view this idea [Christ] has complete reality within itself." The idea *alone* is sufficient for demonstrating its own feasibility in the sensible world: "We *ought* to conform to it, and therefore we must *be able* to." The very fact that the idea of a perfected humanity imposes upon our will the incentive to emulate it is enough to demonstrate the possibility of such emulation.[14] The idea of reason is sufficient; no phenomenal supplement is required. From this two consequences follow: first, the hypothesis of imitation as proof is rendered superfluous, and, second, Christ's objective existence (his Incarnation) becomes unnecessary. (6:62)

[14] Kant writes, "Even if there had never been one human being capable of unconditional obedience to the law, the objective necessity that there be such a human being would yet be undiminished and self-evident. There is no need, therefore, of any example from experience to make the idea of a moral human being morally pleasing to God a model to us; the idea is present as model already in our reason."

However, a strange transition takes place at the beginning of the second paragraph. Rather than concluding that he has just demonstrated the *superfluity* of Christ's objective existence, Kant *instead* concludes that he has proved its *possibility*: "Just for this reason an experience must be possible in which the example of such a being is given". This is in fact the case: since his argument for the superfluity of the Incarnation was based on the idea of reason providing its own proof for the possibility of being realised, it is possible for someone (Christ, for instance) to have once realised it. Thus, (quite unexpectedly) Kant achieves the first conclusion set out above: there is no reason to think that Jesus did not live "a course of life entirely blameless and as meritorious as indeed one may ever wish". (6:63)[15] The Incarnation is compatible with Kantian philosophy.

It is from such a perspective that Kant now begins to deal with the *imitatio Christi*: having shown that a traditional imitation of the life of Jesus of Nazareth is a possibility (since there is no reason to doubt such a life), Kant begins his demonstration of how such imitation could be at all consistent with morality.

FIRST ATTEMPT

The first attempt at reconciling imitation of a phenomenal Christ with his moral theory does not lead Kant very far. Indeed, he rehearses many of the obvious problems with this synthesis that had already occurred in the *Groundwork*. He states,

> According to the law, each and every human being should furnish in his own self an example of this idea. And the required prototype always resides only in reason, since outer experience yields no example adequate to the idea, it does not disclose the inwardness of the disposition but only allows inference to it, though not with strict certainty. (6:63)

Kant outlines two familiar obstacles to imitation here. First, imitation is an external relation to someone else's imperative, whereas morality resides in autonomy, in obeying one's own sense of duty. Thus, rather than imitate another, all humans should 'furnish in his own self an example of this idea'. Second, the condition for a good action resides in its compliance to practical reason; however, such reason remains

[15] Of course, this is not to say that Kant subscribes to the whole Biblical narrative of Jesus' life; even in this section he is intent on downplaying any form of miraculous action in Jesus' life (6:62), and, in the previous section, he had given the phrase, 'the Son of God', a purely allegorical interpretation (6:61-2).

inscrutable to the spectator, limited as she is to intuition of the sensible.[16] Consigned to the phenomenal and so excluded from perceiving the ethical action in itself, 'outer experience yields no example adequate to the idea'.

In terms of imitation, this means that the good cannot be imitated because it is never perceived as such. Even Christ, even the idea of morally perfected humanity itself, Kant thus suggests, does not shine forth as unproblematically good in the phenomenal realm, but is rather subject to the ineluctable ambiguities of sensible existence. It is for these reasons that Kant is so ambivalent towards imitation in his ethical writings, and why, in the *Metaphysics of Morals*, he consigns it to a prolegomena to morality proper. No moral imitation of Christ is possible on the condition of his objective existence.

In this way, Kant's first attempt fails. It seems that Christ cannot truly exist phenomenally *and* be an object of imitation. One of them must be discarded. In the previous section, Kant had shown how the *imitatio Christi* was perfectly possible as long as Christ remained a mere intellectual prototype with no pretensions to objective existence; this paragraph shows that as long as Christ is believed to have existed in the sensible world, he cannot be imitated as an example of the good. As soon as Jesus is said to have been incarnated, he can only be an exemplar "to the extent that one can at all expect and ask for evidence of inner moral disposition from an external experience" (6:63), that is, not at all.

SECOND ATTEMPT

Kant, therefore, begins again. He is again intent on not retreating to his position in the previous section in which Christ was merely a subjective ideal, belonging to thought but alien to the world of sense. Kant wants to demonstrate his theological orthodoxy by showing both that there is no reason on his philosophical views to deny Christ's Incarnation (which he *has* just demonstrated) and also that there is a compatibility between the imitation of the life of Jesus and his moral theory.

It is for this reason that the second attempt begins by presupposing Christ's phenomenal existence as a premise; that is, Kant begins with the Incarnation as an assumed fact, "If a human being of such a truly divine disposition had descended, as it were, from heaven to earth at a specific time…". Kant, then, goes on to assume a

[16] Indeed, Kant continues, such compliance to practical reason is not even entirely transparent to the subject herself.

number of the tenets of theological orthodoxy that Christ "exhibited in his self, through teaching, conduct and suffering, the *example* of a human being well-pleasing to God" and also that he instigated "a revolution in the human race" towards the good. (6:63)

From these facts two possible interpretations follow: that Christ could have achieved this as a human or as divine. Of course, Kant is well aware that traditionally both statements are predicated of Christ, but in separating them he is being charitable: it is not that both interpretations must be demonstrated (Christ fulfilled the above list of achievements *both* as human *and* divine), rather Kant would in fact be satisfied if *either* of them managed to be shown.

He turns first to Christ's humanity, and writes, "Even then [after the above actions traditionally ascribed to Christ] we would have no cause to assume in him anything else except a naturally begotten human being (because he too feels to be under the obligation to exhibit such an example himself)" (6:63). This is all Kant has to say about this option, he seems to think he has concluded against it and moves on to Christ as divine. Indeed, Kant has just shown (in the first attempt) why Christ cannot be imitated morally if he is assumed to be human: Christ (as human) is no more worthy of imitation than any other virtuous human, the imitation of whom, as Kant makes clear in his ethical writings, can never belong to ethics proper but only its prolegomena.

Is Christ as divine any more worthy of imitation? Of course, in one respect he obviously is, since what is divine about him is precisely his commensurability with the idea of a morally perfected humanity. Yet, such a conclusion cannot get Kant beyond the conclusions already established in the previous section. Thus, the question is rather whether Christ – as an objectively existing divinity existing alongside individual humans – is worthy of imitation. This is Kant's response: "The elevation of a Holy One above every frailty of human nature would rather stand in the way of the practical adoption of the ideas of such a being for our imitation."(6:64) As divine, Christ is utterly *unlike* humanity, and so cannot conceivably be imitated; indeed, imitation becomes impossible on this view.[17] Kant continues, "The consequent distance from the natural human being would then again become so infinitely great that the divine human being could no longer be held forth to the natural human being

[17] Such a view correlates with the third passage quoted above from the *Groundwork*, in which to imitate something inassimilable to humanity was heteronomous.

as *example*." (ibid.) Christ as divine can no longer be a role-model, for he shares so little with man; this is not to say he does not have moral significance – indeed Kant affirms that Christ's divinity should give rise "to admiration, love and thankfulness toward him". "Yet," he concludes categorically, "he himself could *not* be presented to us *as an example to be emulated*, hence also not as a proof that so pure and exalted a moral goodness can be practised and attained *by us*." (ibid.)

Both alternatives fall short of a satisfactory formulation of imitation. Thus, Kant's attempt at reconciling Christ's objective existence with morally significant imitation of him ends in failure once again.

THIRD ATTEMPT

It is thus surprising that Kant then embarks once again on an attempt to formulate the *imitatio*, and what is even more surprising is that this time he thinks he succeeds. The new element, however, Kant brings to this attempt is his *unconcern* for Christ immediately displaying the good in his conduct within the phenomenal world. Kant is no longer interested in the immediate properties of Christ's objective existence in the world, such as his conduct, his suffering, his exemplary acts of charity etc. None of these are relevant to our imitation of him. Instead, what Kant is now interested in is *Christ's discourse*, the fact that he "speak[s] truly of himself as if the ideal of goodness were displayed incarnate in him (in his teaching and conduct)" (6:66). What makes Christ a role model is *what he teaches about himself*: Christ's exemplarity is mediated through his own discourse, rather than emanating from his mere empirical behaviour.[18] Hence, Kant writes Christ "would be speaking only of the disposition which he makes the rule of his actions but which, since he cannot make it visible as an example to others in and of itself, he places it before their eyes externally through his teachings" (ibid.). Only when mediated through his pedagogical relation to the world can Christ make his moral disposition evident to other subjects, and only then can he *both* exist objectively *and* remain an exemplar to be followed. Exemplarity is only possible on the basis of teaching:

> When expressed in thought as the ideal of humankind, such a disposition [as Christ's is]… is perfectly valid for all human beings, at all times, and in all

[18] There is a rejection here of traditional empiricist understandings of the operations of example. The example is not an immediate and literal manifestation of a concept, but is itself mediated through discourse. Kant's use of Christ here suggests a very different way of understanding the role of sensible examples in his work.

> worlds, before the highest righteousness, whenever a human being makes his own like unto it, as he ought… An appropriation of it for the sake of our own [disposition] must be possible, provided that ours is associated with the disposition of the prototype. (ibid.)

We *can* become good through an "appropriation" of Christ's goodness (expressed intellectually in his teaching), *by imitating what he teaches rather than what he is*. The problem of imitation is here circumvented: while another's good *action* can never be exemplary for us, through another's *thought of the good* we can learn to be good ourselves – since that proceeds directly from their reason to our reason, without being corrupted by realisation in the sensible realm.[19] Christ *can* be imitated via pedagogical mediation.

In this third attempt, therefore, Kant finally *does* manage to reconcile Christ's objective existence with a morally significant imitation of him. Yet, it is not Christ's existence itself which gives the solution, but the teaching which he imparts about the good (when objectively existing in the world). It is this teaching which provides the motivation for good action. Imitation is *not* founded on the contingency of immediate existence, but made possible through teaching as a form of *rational communication*; only what is shared intersubjectively in rational agreement can be imitated, Kant here claims. In pedagogy, action-guiding norms are *worked through between us with our participation and consent*[20]: the good is *produced* in dialogue, not imposed upon us as an obligation. This is Kant's reconception of the Kingdom of Ends![21]

What is more, imitation is here not merely a prolegomena to true morality; *it is part of the process of practical reasoning itself*. However, neither is it the case that all imitation is valorised: only what proceeds through *discourse* about the good is salvaged as feasible for an *imitatio Christi*. This is – to quote Moritz once more – imitation 'in the nobler moral sense'.

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[19] Hence, the problem of incarnation is still only left aside rather than tackled head-on.
[20] Although, of course, such intersubjective rational norms are always provisional and open-ended: they are always a task to be fulfilled.
[21] In this way, it foreshadows the third part of the *Religion* which will emphasise even more explicitly the sociality underlying morality.

A SOCRATIC CHRIST

Kant gives in his *imitatio Christi* a model for truly moral imitation: the imitation of what is good mediated through discursive reasoning about the good. However, at the same time, the discussion in the *Religion* suggests only the barest possible sketch of what such a model might look like. I will now – in this final section – attempt to speculatively fill out this model by returning to Kant's ethical writings. There is, indeed, one aspect of this model that *has* become certain – morally significant imitation is bound up with *teaching* the good.

However, the very possibility of moral teaching is problematic for Kant; hence, he writes in his *Lectures on Pedagogy*,

> One of the biggest problems of education is how we can unite submission under lawful constraint with the capacity to use one's freedom. For constraint is necessary [since one is always being taught by someone else in whose power one must commit oneself]. How do I cultivate freedom under constraint? I shall accustom my pupil to tolerate a constraint of his freedom, and I shall at the same time lead him to make good use of his freedom. Without this everything is a mere mechanism, and the pupil who is released from education does not know how to use his freedom. (9:453)

Despite these qualms, there are passages in Kant's work where the possibility of moral teaching (and so its compatibility with autonomy) is elucidated. A final section of the *Metaphysics of Morals*, entitled "Teaching Ethics", is, for example, devoted to it; it also receives considerable attention in part two of the second *Critique*; and the *Lectures on Pedagogy* contain sections treating it. Such passages will enable us, therefore, to get a grip on the way in which Kant conceived Christ's teaching as a teaching of the good to be imitated.

I will begin with the "Teaching Ethics" section of the *Metaphysics of Morals*. Despite his scepticism about the possibility of teaching the good in other texts and even elsewhere in this work, Kant is here adamant that virtue (at least) *is teachable*; he states, "That virtue can and must be *taught* already follows from its not being innate; a doctrine of virtue is therefore *something that can be taught*." (6:477)

Morally-significant teaching can indeed take place.[22] Kant then moves on to list what form such teaching of virtue could possibly take:

> As for the method of teaching… it can be set forth either by *lectures*, when all those to whom it is directed merely *listen*, or else by *questions*, when the teacher asks his pupils what he wants to teach them. And this erotetic method is, in turn, divided into the method of *dialogue* and that of *catechism*, depending on whether the teacher addresses his questions to the pupil's reason or just to his memory. For if the teacher wants to question his pupil's reason he must do this in a dialogue in which teacher and pupil question and answer each other *in turn*. The teacher, by his questions, guides his young pupil's course of thought merely by presenting him with cases in which his predisposition for certain concepts will develop (the teacher is the midwife of the pupil's thoughts)." (6:478)

There are three methods described here: lecturing, in which the pupil is merely passive, catechism, in which only the pupil's memory is active and finally dialogue, in which the whole of the pupil's reason is actively engaged in practical thinking. This latter method is Socratic: the teacher uses her questions to arouse *anamnesis* of the good – the innate categorical imperative – through activating her pupil's thinking. In the *Lectures on Pedagogy*, the Socratic method is revealed as Kant's favoured mode of moral education:

> In the formation of reason, we must proceed Socratically… On many matters children do not need to exercise reason. They must not reason about everything. They do not need to know the reasons for everything which is meant to make them well-educated. But *as soon as duty is concerned*, then the reasons in question must be made known to them. However, in general, one must see to it that one does not carry rational knowledge into them but rather extracts it from them. The Socratic method should be the rule for the catechetical method. (9:477)

The Socratic method is *the* "rule" for ethical teaching, for it activates the child's reason and cultivates autonomy, allowing the child to think for herself and produce maxims for herself, rather than the teacher 'carrying' such maxims 'into' her.

Moreover, Socratic dialogue is, in the same way, a very promising model for Christ's teaching. A Socratic Christ would cultivate the disciple's knowledge of the

[22] Again, therefore, Kant goes beyond his own model in the *Metaphysics of Morals* in which such an external relation can be at most a prelude to ethics proper

good without restricting her autonomy; in the *imitatio Christi*, the disciple is not passively imitating anything he has stated, but rather actively imitating what she and Christ achieve together in dialogue – the knowledge of the good produced by the *process* of his teaching, rather than the propositional sense his teachings convey. The emphasis is on teaching's perlocutionary effects, rather than its locutionary meaning.

The properties of such Socratic teaching can be seen even more clearly in a model Kant proposes in the *Critique of Practical Reason*, where, at the end of the work, he embarks on a description of what this cultivation of moral judgment and rational agreement would look like in action. Groups of people, he observes, have a natural inclination to argue and "of all arguments there are none that more excite the participation of persons who are otherwise soon bored with subtle reasoning and that bring a certain liveliness into the company than arguments about the *moral worth* of this or that action by which the character of some person is to be made out." (5:153) He continues,

> I do not know why educators of young people have not long since made use of this propensity of reason to enter with pleasure upon even the most subtle examination of the practical questions put to them and why they have not, after first laying the foundation in a purely moral catechism, searched through all the biographies of ancient and modern times in order to have at hand instances for the duties presented, in which, especially by comparison of similar actions under different circumstances, they could well activate their pupils appraisal in marking the lesser or greater moral import of such actions; they would find that someone very young, who is not yet ready for speculation, would soon become very acute and not a little interested, since he would feel the progress of his faculty of judgment; and, what is most important, they could hope with confidence that frequent practice in knowing good conduct in all its purity and approving it and, on the other hand, marking with regret or contempt the least deviation from it, even though it is carried on only as a game of judgment… by mere habituation, repeatedly looking on such actions as deserving approval or censure, would make a good foundation for uprightness in the future conduct of life. (5:154-5)[23]

[23] In the *Lectures on Pedagogy*, Kant labels this method the "catechism of right", and continues (this time with examples): "It would have to contain cases which would be popular, which occur in ordinary life, and which would always naturally raise the question whether something is right or not. For

Socratic questioning here receives a Rousseauan gist.[24] Just as Rousseau recommends that children discard their books to learn morality by considering examples, so in a very similar way Kant conceives the role of the Socratic teacher to be that of proposing concrete historical examples of actions and asking her pupils to judge their moral worth.[25] Such 'experimental' methods, Kant claims, will exercise and so strengthen the pupil's practical reason, cultivating her autonomy and ability to make moral decisions.

In fact, such an activity seems to be precisely what Kant has in mind with Christ's teaching. The only significant difference is that, while the merely human Socratic teacher must draw examples from ancient history, Christ is able to discourse about the example which is his own life. Thus, in the *Religion*, Kant does not merely draw attention to Christ's discourse but rather his discourse *about himself*: he is "able to speak truly *of himself* as if the ideal of goodness were displayed incarnate in him" (6:66; my emphasis). Christ does not speak of the good in the abstract, but rather "he would be speaking *only* of the disposition which he makes the rule of *his* actions" (ibid; my emphases). While the method of Christ's teaching may be Socratic, the subject matter (in traditional Johannine fashion) is Christ himself. Prosaically put, Kant seems to conceive the imitation of Christ as proceeding in the following manner: Christ, in his speech, points to the example of his own irreproachable behaviour and asks why it is good; in answering this question, the disciples must use their own practical reason for themselves in deliberating on the moral law and how it is realised; such deliberation cultivates and strengthens the role of the moral law in the disciples' mind. The result of this fruit is a newly awakened appreciation of the categorical imperative – this is the product of Christ's teaching, and it is this which the disciple must imitate. Such is the Kantian *imitatio Christi*. Indeed, we can see in this Socratic Christ a member of the vanguard Kant calls upon in "What is Enlightenment?":

> There will always be a few independent thinkers, even among the established guardians of the great masses, who, after having themselves cast off the yoke

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example, if someone who should pay his creditor today is touched through the sight of someone in need and gives him the sum which he owes and should now pay – is this right or not?" (9:490)

[24] Although the passage is followed with a jibe that could perhaps be read as a criticism of Rousseau: "I do wish educators would spare their pupils examples of so-called *noble* (supermeritorious) actions, with which our sentimental writings so abound" (5:155)

[25] Of course, a problem still remains of how these examples can be truly judged since their ground remains inscrutable. A tantalising space seems to open up here for imagination and the aesthetic to have a role in cultivating moral judgment.

> of minority, will disseminate the spirit of rational valuing of one's own worth and of the calling of each individual to think for himself. (Kant 1996a 8:36)

Therefore, in comparison to the celebration of mimesis in contemporary theory, which transforms imitation into a form of desire, and sometimes even a biological instinct. The eighteenth-century's discussion of imitation took place on a more sceptical footing. There was a profound unease about the moral implications of the concept – it seemed to border on duplicity, on external legalism, on heteronomy. It was in this context that many thinkers attempted to distinguish a moral form of imitation mediated through reason. I have followed in this paper many of the twists and turns Kant embarks on in order to rescue some conception of imitation for his moral theory. In his *imitatio Christi*, this ends up as a form of autonomous thinking upon an example of the good rationally communicated. While a concern for the good of desire always remains prior to actual desire for the good in Kant's thought, the two become compatible in his vision of a Socratic Christ.

Indeed, what I hope to have brought out of Kant's work is not only a challenge to traditional interpretations of his Christology (his views on the interplay between the human and the divine in our worldly existence), but a different way of conceiving imitation in general. This form of self-betterment through another is *not* to be conceived on a model of desire, *nor* by means of some illusory projection of the self, but on the basis of an intersubjective relation of rational discussion and education which helps move the self towards *a shared ideal of incarnate rationality*. Such an ideal is not embodied in Christ as divine and other to man, but rather is developed in the interchange of ideas between self and exemplar. As such, the self partakes in this communal ideal as its own. Thus, this *imitatio Christi* belongs to a humanity aiming to become more fully rational and struggling to remain both moral *and* incarnate; it belongs to a humanity striving towards humanity.

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